



## Family Engagement Insider

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# Strong Relationships With Families Boost Students' Success

Schools thrive when families and teachers work together as equal partners to maximize learning inside and outside of the classroom.

### Why Is Engaging Vulnerable Families Important?

Research<sup>1</sup> confirms that positive relationships between teachers and families strengthen students':

- Academic achievement
- Social competencies
- Emotional well-being

This is especially true for students from vulnerable families, such as low-income families, families from communities of color, and families whose primary language is not English. Making genuine connections with vulnerable families opens doors to communication, problem-solving, and mutual support on behalf of students' learning and achievement.

### Two-Way Communication Is Key!

Developing trusting relationships with families takes time, effort, and persistence on the part of the educator. Once families feel connected to you, you'll be able to learn about their values, priorities, goals, and aspirations for their child. This two-way communication helps educators to differentiate learning in the classroom and supports family engagement in student learning.

## Overcoming Barriers to Engaging Vulnerable Families

### Common Barriers Against Positive School Engagement For Vulnerable Families

- » Negative experiences with schooling in the past
- » History of receiving only negative school calls about their child
- » Lack of understanding about the education system and expectations of family involvement
- » Difficulty communicating because the primary language is not English
- » Work during school hours
- » Lack of technology or internet access

### Strategies To Mitigate These Challenges

- » Find out how and when families prefer to be contacted
- » Start the school year with positive calls home
- » Use an interpreter during calls or meetings with families whose primary language is not English
- » Help families understand grade-level learning priorities
- » Give tips for how families can support learning at home
- » Survey families to understand their needs and assets

## 5 Key Ingredients for Developing Trust

- Reliability
- Openness
- Competence
- Vulnerability
- Honesty

## How Can School and District Leaders Help Foster Strong Relationships With Families?

School and district leaders set the tone and create the conditions for healthy relationships between teachers and families. But these relationships take time, effort, and support from leaders.

### Helpful Tips for Leaders

- Ask teachers if they feel comfortable reaching out to connect with vulnerable families.
- Provide training and guidance to teachers to develop their skills and confidence in reaching out to vulnerable families.
- Set time aside with staff to share and discuss articles about the power of relationships and their impact on student learning and school improvement.
- Invite parents to share stories of positive relationships with teachers, and the impact teachers have made on their child and family. Personal stories are a powerful motivator!

## How Can Teachers Inspire Vulnerable Families to Be Engaged?

Teachers play a critical role in the lives of students and their families. When teachers reach out, families become **involved** in the school. When teachers connect personally and recruit them as trusted and capable partners, families become **invested** in student learning.

### Practical Tips for Reaching Out to Vulnerable Families

- Be positive, thoughtful, creative, and persistent.
- Leave assumptions aside.
- Learn about and recognize families' strengths, experiences, ideas, and aspirations.
- Remember that students and their families are unique — one size does not fit all.

A study of high-poverty Title I schools found that strong outreach and engagement with families of struggling elementary students led to **40–50% higher growth in students' reading and math test scores.**<sup>ii</sup>

Families engage in student learning when teachers

- Take the time to personally connect
- Reach out with positive news about their children
- Understand the families' values, goals, and aspirations
- Share student performance data and learning tips
- Treat families as trusted and capable partners

## Which of the Following Relationship Development Strategies Have You Tried or Would Try With Support?

- ☐ Send a personal letter to the home of each student and their family at the start of the school year to help them get to know you and become excited about being in your class.
- ☐ Make positive calls home for every student. Begin with those you think may be challenging and those you suspect rarely receive positive calls.
- ☐ Host a virtual home visit (e.g., Zoom call) to learn about your students' hopes, dreams, values, and home culture. Use this information to differentiate instruction for your students.
- ☐ Invite families to virtual classroom celebrations. Start each celebration with a team-building activity so everyone feels connected and comfortable.

i Forsyth, P.B., Adams, C., & Hoy, W. K. (2011). *Collective trust: Why schools can't improve without it*. Teachers College Press.

ii Westat and Policy Studies Associates. (2001). *The longitudinal evaluation of school change and performance in Title I schools: Volume 2. Technical Report*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service.